

NEGOTIATIONS WITH  
COMMISSIONER OSWALD (LOWER LEFT)  
IN D-YARD, SEPTEMBER 1971

Prisoners appointed leaders to organize negotiations and manage the media. At the behest of the prisoners, Commissioner Oswald allowed outside observers access to witness the negotiations.

ELIZABETH M. FINK ATTICA ARCHIVES/MICHAEL HULL

# -OPEN WOUNDS-

THE 50-YEAR LEGACY  
OF THE ATTICA PRISON UPRISING

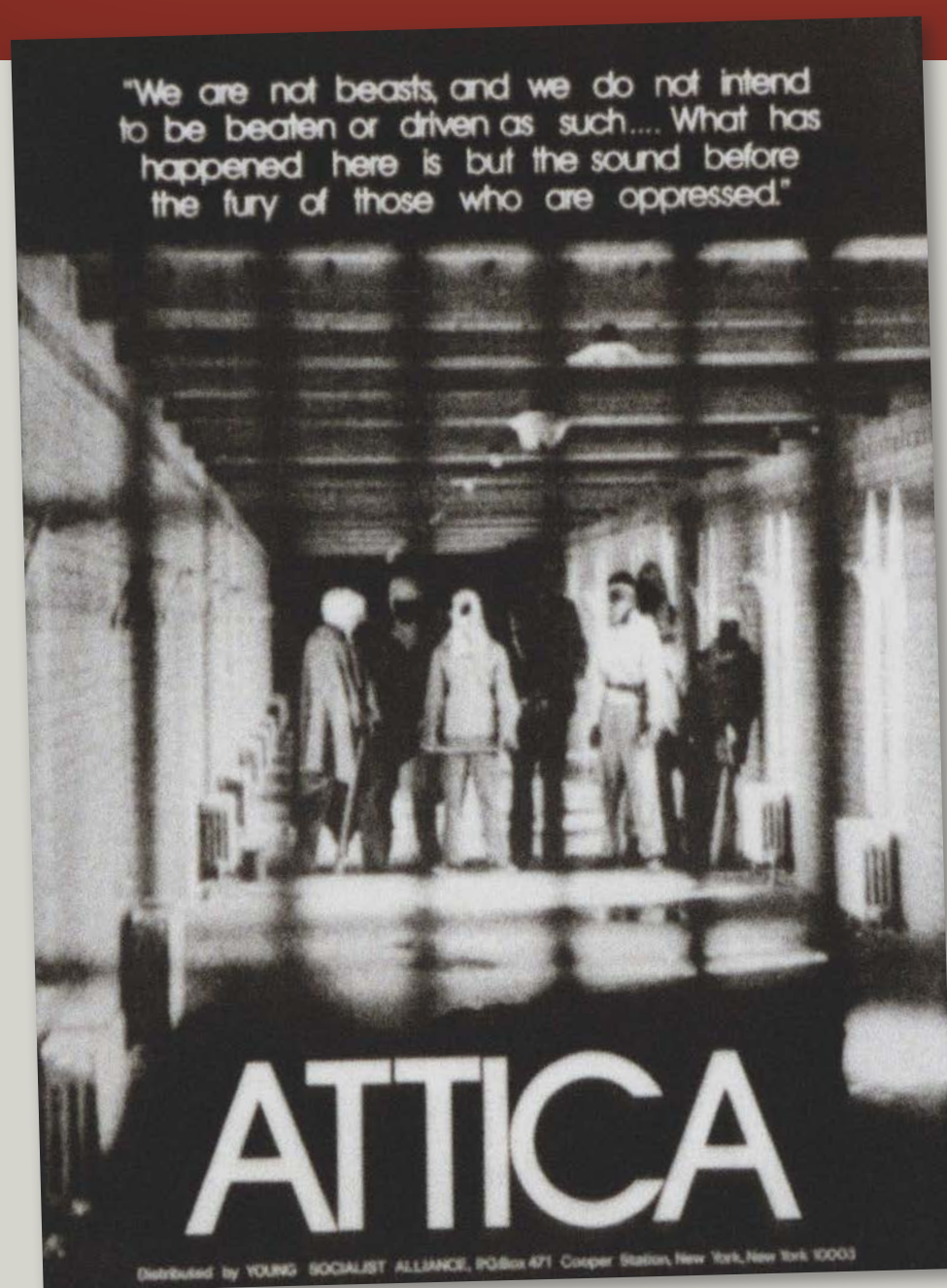
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New York State  
Museum

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The State Education Department | Office of Cultural Education



**“WE ARE MEN! WE ARE NOT BEASTS AND WE DO NOT INTEND TO BE BEATEN OR DRIVEN AS SUCH.”**

— L. D. BARKLEY, SPOKESMAN OF THE ATTICA UPRISING, 1971



TOP:

**ATTICA RALLY, BUFFALO, NEW YORK, c. 1972**

The events at Attica haunted prisoners, hostages, guards, elected officials, lawyers, judges, reporters, and related families for decades.

ELIZABETH M. FINK PHOTO COLLECTION, ATTICA REVISITED PROJECT, UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY, SUNY

ABOVE:

**ATTICA: “WE ARE NOT BEASTS, AND WE DO NOT INTEND TO BE BEATEN OR DRIVEN AS SUCH . . .”**

The events at Attica occurred behind thick concrete walls. Efforts by New York State to prevent accurate information about prison conditions and the uprising from reaching the public helped obscure what really happened there. Civil rights organizations across the county quickly rallied for the Attica prisoners. The Young Socialist Alliance created this poster in response.

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In September 1971, incarcerated men at the Attica State Correctional Facility found themselves in a standoff against New York State. Conditions at the prison were deplorable and dehumanizing—abuse, overcrowding, and inadequate food and medical care among the problems. Prisoners took 42 hostages from prison staff in an attempt to negotiate satisfactory changes.

The uprising took place after a decade of significant social change and upheaval in the United States. The civil rights movement questioned America’s commitment to equality and brought forward issues of social justice, while critics of President Johnson’s Great Society claimed the federal government was increasing the welfare state to the detriment of society. The Vietnam War provoked large-scale protests, radical student activism spread across college campuses, and militancy increased within the African American community. By the end of the 1960s, many Americans sought a restoration of “law and order,” prompting a resurgence of social conservatism by the early 1970s.

Attica is remembered as both a failure of the American prison system and a call for justice against human-rights violations. This exhibition presents various viewpoints of the uprising and its aftermath and explains why this event is still important 50 years later.

**“IF WE CANNOT LIVE  
AS PEOPLE, THEN WE WILL AT  
LEAST TRY TO DIE LIKE MEN.”**

**— CHARLES H. CROWLEY,  
INCARCERATED AT ATTICA, 1971**



**MEDICAL VOLUNTEERS FROM AMONG THE INCARCERATED POPULATION AT ATTICA, SEPTEMBER 1971**

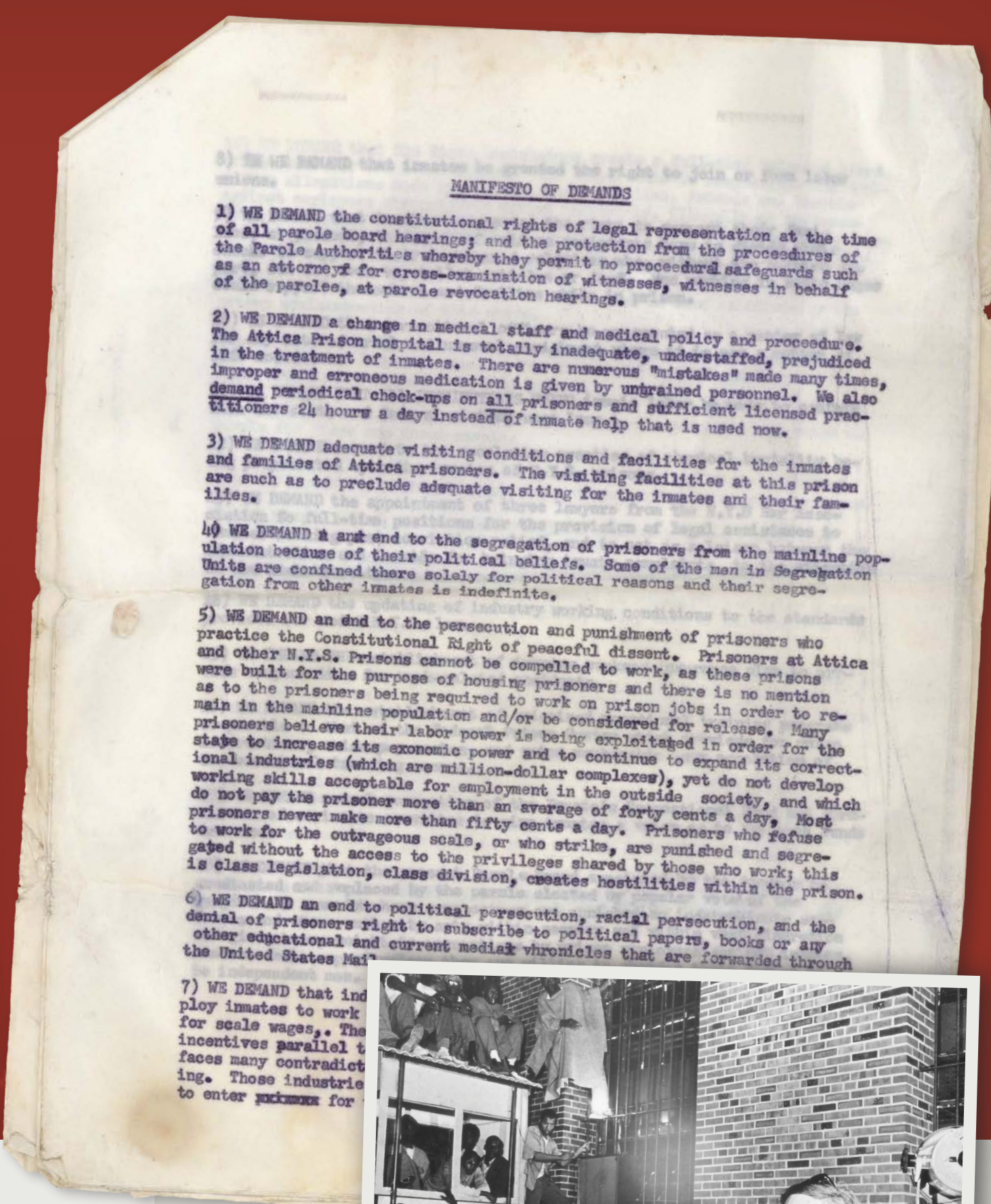
Once assembled in D-yard, prisoners made a medical station and cared for and protected both fellow prisoners and hostages during the four-day standoff.

ELIZABETH M. FINK ATTICA ARCHIVES/MICHAEL HULL

In July 1971, a group of prisoners calling themselves the Attica Liberation Faction presented Russell Oswald, the commissioner of Correctional Services, with a list of desired reforms. The prisoners called for improved living conditions, better medical care, increased wages in prison industry, and better oversight of facility staff. While Oswald publicly agreed with these reforms, none of them were achieved and frustrations intensified in the over-crowded prison.

On the morning of September 9, an argument between prisoners and guards led to a fight, which escalated and spread as the guards were overpowered. Correction Officer William Quinn was badly beaten during the altercations. Within 90 minutes, 42 guards and employees were taken hostage while more than 1,200 inmates assembled in D-yard.

After two days of organization, the prisoners presented a list of 28 demands, similar to the July manifesto. Commissioner Oswald accepted most of the prisoners' demands but refused to provide amnesty to the protesters. On September 11, William Quinn died from his injuries; the announcement of his death quickly complicated the negotiations.



TOP RIGHT:

**ATTICA LIBERATION FACTION MANIFESTO OF DEMANDS  
AND ANTI-DEPRESSION PLATFORM, JULY 1971**

NEW YORK STATE MUSEUM COLLECTION

BOTTOM RIGHT:

**OBSERVERS IN D-YARD**

Attorney William Kuntsler, one of 33 observers invited by the men incarcerated at Attica to assist with negotiations with the state, addresses the men in D-yard. The observers, a diverse group of political leaders, civil rights advocates, community organizers, and journalists, responded to the men's request in the hopes of ending the standoff without further bloodshed.

ELIZABETH M. FINK ATTICA ARCHIVES/MICHAEL HULL

**“IF ONE EXAMINES THE TWENTY-EIGHT  
DEMANDS ACCEPTED BY THE STATE . . .  
ONE SEES THAT THESE PROPOSALS REPRESENT  
NOT A RIOT BY PRISONERS TRYING TO ESCAPE,  
BUT THE DESPERATE, LAST-GASP ATTEMPT BY  
1,200 MEN TO ACHIEVE A DECENT  
STANDARD OF SURVIVAL.”**

**— U.S. CONGRESSMAN HERMAN BADILLO (NY-22),  
ATTICA OBSERVER, 1971**



**GOV. NELSON A. ROCKEFELLER (RIGHT) WITH RICHARD AND PAT NIXON IN ALBANY, 1968**

Rockefeller had presidential ambitions. However, he was saddled with a reputation as a liberal in a party that was moving to the Right. Attica was his chance to position himself as a stalwart of law and order.

NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES

**“YOU SEE IT’S THE BLACK BUSINESS . . .  
HE HAD TO DO IT.”**

**— PRES. RICHARD M. NIXON, IN RESPONSE TO  
GOV. NELSON A. ROCKEFELLER’S  
RETAKE OF ATTICA, SEPTEMBER 1971**

Despite several requests from the prisoners and the observers, Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller refused to travel to Attica for negotiations. On September 13, 1971, the New York State Police, correction officers, and local law enforcement brought the four-day standoff to a violent and bloody conclusion. According to the state’s official report, “The decision to retake the prison . . . was a decisive reassertion by the state of its sovereignty and power.” The forcible retaking of Attica left an additional 39 people dead, including nine hostages. All had been killed by gunfire from law enforcement.

Governor Rockefeller applauded the swift actions of the State Police, and false information about atrocities committed by prisoners against the hostages quickly spread. Once the state resumed control, those involved in the protest were subjected to an “orgy of brutality” at the hands of guards, including being stripped and beaten. Rebellion leaders were marked on their bodies with a chalk “X” and were tortured and harassed, waiting days for medical treatment. Families of the incarcerated anxiously waited for news of their loved ones, but most were never contacted.



**“A WATCHING WORLD RECOILED IN HORROR AS A HEAVILY  
ARMED NEW YORK STATE ASSAULT FORCE MOVED INTO D-YARD  
OF ATTICA PRISON, FIRING AUTOMATIC WEAPONS, DEER RIFLES  
AND SHOTGUNS . . . THE RESULTING TRAGEDY MUST RANK WITH  
MY LAI AND WOUNDED KNEE IN THE ANNALS OF AMERICAN  
GOVERNMENT INHUMANITY.”**

**— W. HAYWOOD BURNS, NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF BLACK LAWYERS,  
PROFESSOR OF LAW, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY, NOVEMBER 1975**

TOP RIGHT, BACKGROUND:

**NEW YORK STATE POLICE ENTER ATTICA PRISON**

Heavily armed New York State Police prepare to enter Attica Correctional Facility prior to retaking it on September 13, 1971. In a span of six minutes, law enforcement personnel fired more than 2,000 ballistic projectiles into the confined spaces of D-yard.

NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES

LEFT:

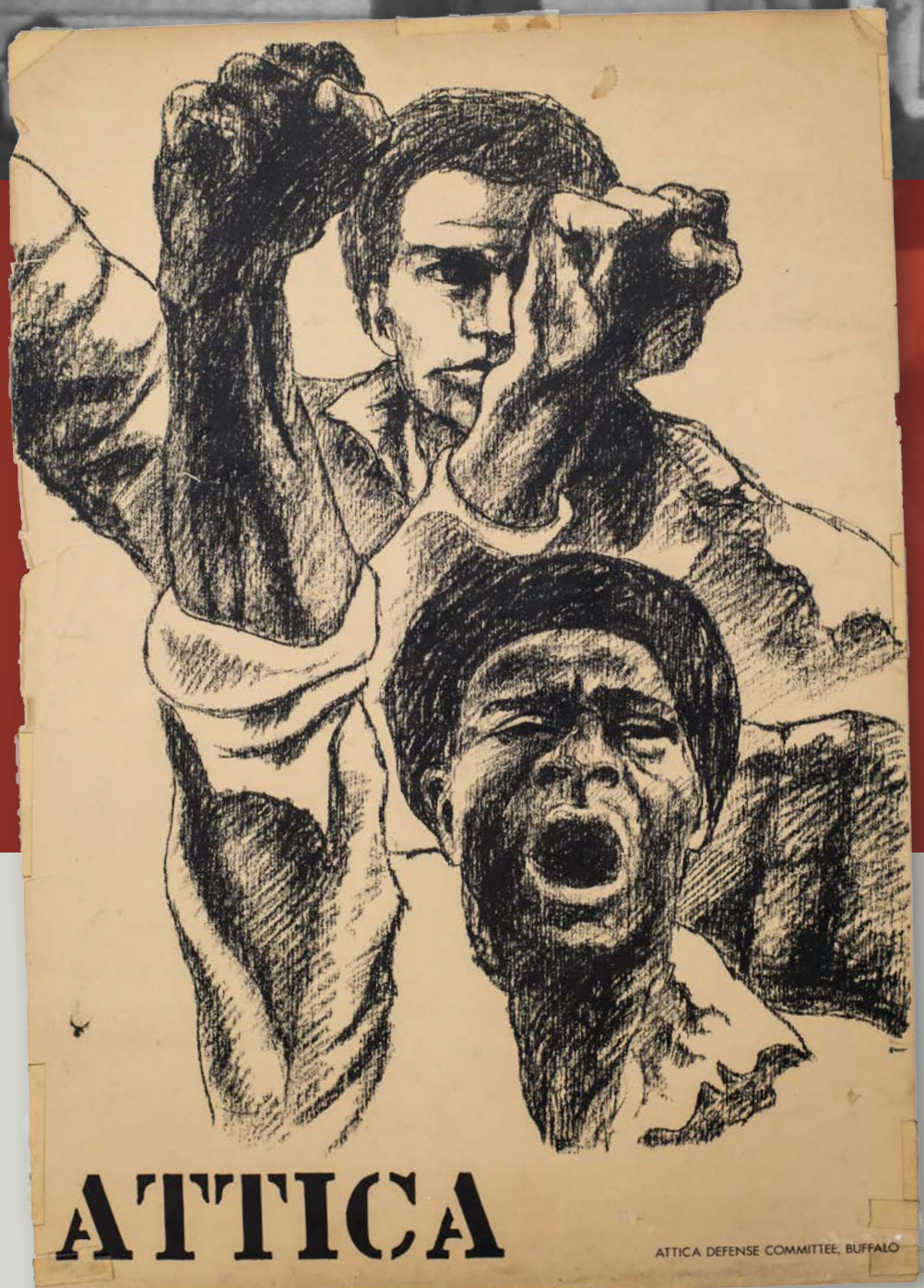
**MUSLIM PRISONERS SURRENDERING, 1971**

Muslim prisoners at Attica were particularly ill-treated before the uprising, yet they went to extraordinary lengths to protect the hostages.

ELIZABETH M. FINK ATTICA ARCHIVES/MICHAEL HULL

**PROTESTERS IN SUPPORT OF THE ATTICA BROTHERS IN FRONT OF THE FEDERAL COURTHOUSE IN BUFFALO, c. 1972**

ELIZABETH M. FINK ATTICA ARCHIVES/MICHAEL HULL



**“ATTICA,” c. 1971–1973**

Poster created in support of the Attica Defense Committee in Buffalo.

NEW YORK STATE MUSEUM COLLECTION, H-2011.44.1



**NEW YORK STATE POLICE EVIDENCE COLLECTION, 1971**

Investigators from the New York State Police collected evidence for potential future prosecutions of prisoners who had participated in the rebellion. Investigators focused on collecting evidence that would incriminate the prisoners in D-yard.

TROOPER (RET.) WALTER HORNBERGER ATTICA PHOTO COLLECTION, NEW YORK STATE MUSEUM

**“ATTICA IS THE GHOST THAT HAS NEVER STOPPED HAUNTING ITS SURVIVORS . . .”**

**— HON. MICHAEL A. TELESKA, AUGUST 2000**

Governor Rockefeller directed the State Attorney General’s Office to investigate “alleged criminal acts committed in connection with the five-day uprising at Attica.” Every death, injury, and violent act was potentially open to examination. This resulted in 42 indictments charging 62 prisoners with crimes and just one member of law enforcement being charged with reckless endangerment.

At the close of the state’s Attica inquiry in 1974, Malcolm Bell, a lawyer on the prosecutorial staff, publicly criticized the failure to prosecute crimes allegedly committed by law enforcement personnel. A resulting investigation, led by Hon. Bernard Meyer, found that serious errors of judgment and important omissions in gathering evidence resulted in an imbalance in the prosecution.

In 1976 Gov. Hugh Carey, hoping to “close the book on Attica,” pardoned seven convicted inmates and commuted the sentence of an eighth. Nevertheless, questions relating to the deaths or injuries of more than 100 correction officers, staff, and prisoners were never fully answered. In 2000, after several trials and appeals, a class-action civil suit filed on behalf of 1,281 Attica prisoners was settled for \$12 million in damages.

# FORGOTTEN VICTIMS OF ATTICA:

“ONCE THE STATE DECIDED THE REBELLION WAS NO LONGER TOLERABLE, THE LIVES OF HOSTAGES WERE EXPENDABLE . . .”

— OFFICIAL REPORT OF THE NEW YORK STATE SPECIAL COMMISSION ON ATTICA, 1972



Raymond Bogart recounts the retaking of Attica prison during his testimony at the Attica Task Force public hearings on August 12, 2002, at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Bogart, a guard in A Block, was taken prisoner during the uprising there in September 1971.

DEMOCRAT & CHRONICLE



Maryann Valone reacts while listening to former Attica prison guard, John Stockholm, talk about the beatings he endured. This public forum occurred in 2002, when members of the Forgotten Victims of Attica told their stories.

AP PHOTO/DEMOCRAT & CHRONICLE, SHAWN DOWD



Colleen Whalen Spitola, left, gets a hug from Roxanna Willard following her emotional testimony at the Attica Task Force public hearings. Spitola testified about the emotional stress following the death of her father, prison guard Harrison Whalen, who was killed in the retaking of the prison.

DEMOCRAT & CHRONICLE, PHOTO BY SHAWN DOWD, 081202

Shortly after the uprising, the state offered widows of the slain hostages workers'-compensation payments. It was not disclosed that acceptance of these payments precluded future legal action against New York State. Despite repeated promises of financial assistance, the families of the hostages were largely abandoned.

In 1999 the Forgotten Victims of Attica (FVOA) emerged, composed of former hostages, their families, and survivors of facility personnel killed during the uprising. With no avenue for a lawsuit, the FVOA embarked on a public-relations campaign to shame the State of New York into providing a monetary settlement. In 2001 Gov. George E. Pataki appointed an Attica Task Force to investigate issues raised by FVOA. The task force eventually agreed to a \$12 million settlement in 2005, the same amount paid to the Attica Brothers.

**“HE HANDED ME JOHN’S FINAL PAYCHECK AND TOLD ME THAT I HAD TO SIGN THESE PAPERS HE BROUGHT WITH HIM. HE TOLD ME THAT THESE WERE DOCUMENTS THAT ASSURED US THAT THE STATE WOULD TAKE CARE OF JULIE AND ME FOR THE REST OF OUR LIVES. I DIDN’T HAVE A CLUE THAT BY SIGNING THESE PAPERS, I WOULD NEVER BE ABLE TO SUE THE STATE.”**

— ANN DRISCOLL, WIDOW OF JOHN D’ARCANGELO, MAY 10, 2002

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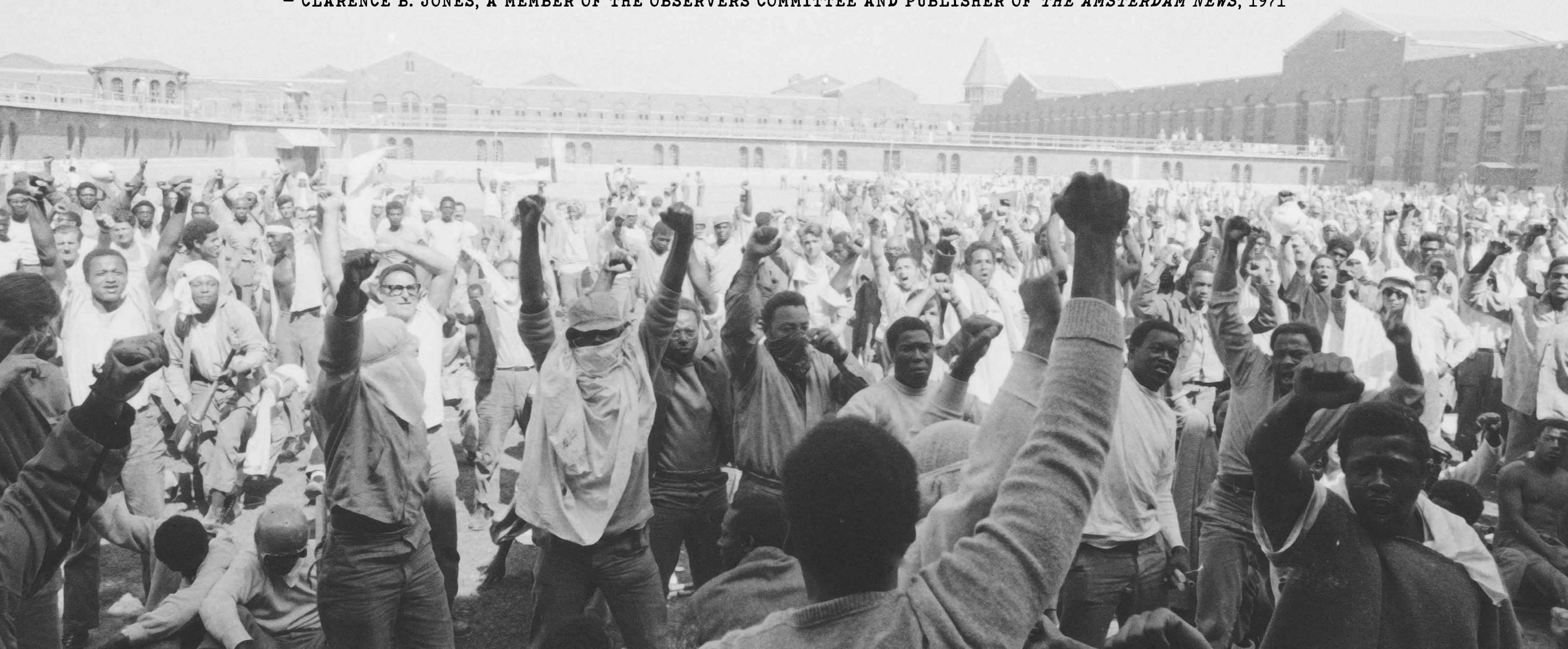
#### ATTICA MEMORIAL

Marble monument to the 11 corrections staff killed during the Attica Prison Uprising. Located on the grounds of the correctional facility, the memorial was dedicated in 1972. In 2005 the Forgotten Victims of Attica were permitted to begin holding memorial services at the site.

FORGOTTEN VICTIMS OF ATTICA/DEE QUINN MILLER

**“ATTICA IS A SYMBOL OF HOPE. THE STRUGGLE FOR SELF-DIGNITY, THE KINSHIP, EXPRESSED AND IMPLIED, AMONG BLACK, PUERTO RICAN, AND WHITE INMATES AND BETWEEN INMATES AND HOSTAGES IN CELL BLOCK D, SHOWS US WHAT YET MAY BE POSSIBLE IN THE SEARCH FOR MEANINGFUL BROTHER AND SISTERHOOD IN OUR SOCIETY.”**

— CLARENCE B. JONES, A MEMBER OF THE OBSERVERS COMMITTEE AND PUBLISHER OF *THE AMSTERDAM NEWS*, 1971



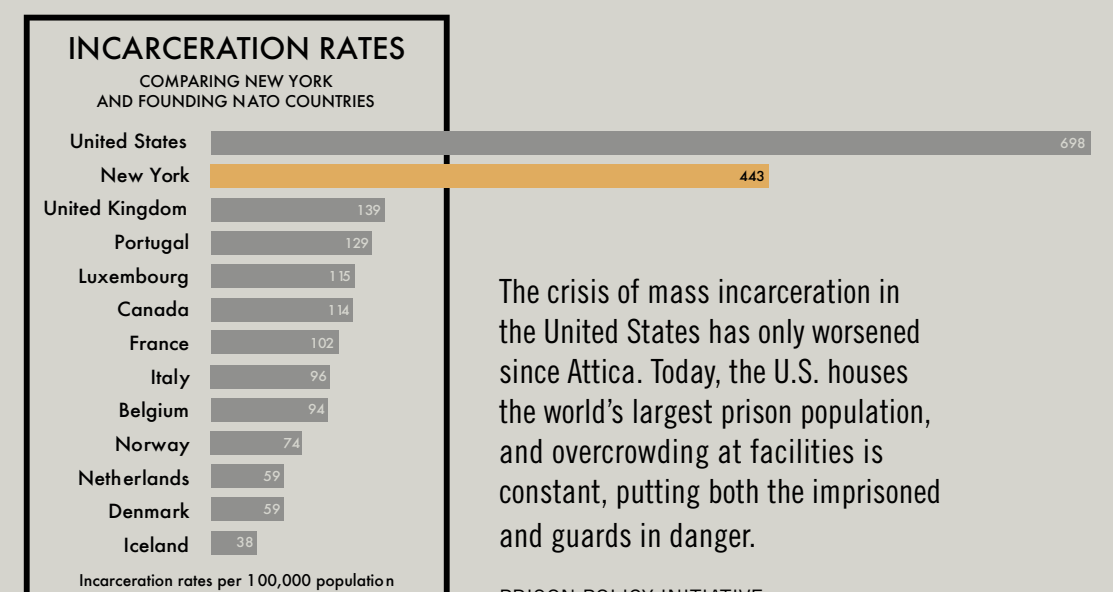
# ATTICA IS ALL OF US

**“THAT’S WHY WE SAY ATTICA IS ALL OF US, ATTICA IS EVERYTHING. IN ORDER FOR ATTICA TO CHANGE, OUT HERE HAS TO CHANGE. WHAT WE SEE, FROM THE COMMUNITY, THROUGH THE POLICE DEPARTMENT, THROUGH THE COURTS AND INTO THE MAXIMUM PRISON. WE SAY THAT BOTH IS A PRISON; ONE IS MINIMUM AND ONE IS MAXIMUM.”**

— FRANK “BIG BLACK” SMITH, *AGENDA MAGAZINE*, OCTOBER 1991

Fears resulting from the uprising at Attica moved administrators and elected officials to increase control over prisons, while prison-reform advocates still pursue many of same improvements the Attica Liberation Faction sought in 1971 but never achieved: access to educational and vocational opportunities; improved medical care, including substance-abuse treatment and mental-health support; an increase in prison-labor wages; and limits on the time spent in solitary confinement, as well as the recruitment of diverse correction officers. In recent years, New York State has taken steps to reverse the harmful policies it once adopted, dismantling of the Rockefeller Drug Laws and raising the age of criminal responsibility. However, incarceration numbers remain high and systemic racism continues to push people of color into prison at disproportionately higher rates. Fifty years after the Attica Prison Uprising, the event continues to serve as a reminder that reforms are still desperately needed in America’s prisons.

## NEW YORK STATE V. OTHER WESTERN DEMOCRACIES (2018)



TOP:

Inmates at Attica State Prison in Attica, N.Y., raise their hands in clenched fists in a show of unity, September 1971, during the Attica uprising, which took the lives of 43 people.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS